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### Gender Differences in Selections Among Topics for Producing Meaningful Utterances

*Diferencias de género en las selecciones entre temas para producir expresiones significativas*

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#### ABSTRACT

This article continues the study of conversation topics as a means of developing learners speech skills, that begun in the previous work "Relevant topics motivating learners of English to produce meaningful utterances". By determining the ratio of preferences with respect to topics for oral utterances among school teachers and students, we have identified the range of problems that cause the greatest interest among modern schoolchildren. The results of this research can be taken into account in the development of textbooks and at refresh courses for foreign language teachers.

**Keywords:** Conversation topics, gender differences, language learning, monitoring, motivation factor.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo continúa el estudio de los temas de conversación como un medio para desarrollar las habilidades del habla de los estudiantes, que comenzó en el trabajo anterior "Temas relevantes que motivan a los estudiantes de inglés a producir expresiones significativas". Al determinar la proporción de preferencias con respecto a temas de enunciados orales entre maestros y estudiantes de escuela, hemos identificado la gama de problemas que causan el mayor interés entre los escolares modernos. Los resultados de esta investigación pueden tenerse en cuenta en la elaboración de libros de texto y en cursos de actualización para profesores de lenguas extranjeras.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje de idiomas, diferencias de género, factor de motivación, seguimiento, temas de conversación.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Personalization has always been the focus of language learning. The purpose of the communicative approach is to get language learners speaking their minds, producing meaningful utterances (Haas: 1979; Pépiot: 2014). Hence, all the efforts to make the most of online language courses, enable every learner to choose the type of activity, the time and place that most suits his/her needs. Moreover, online learners can tailor tasks to their level of linguistic competence and the short-term goals of classroom activities (Newman et al.: 2008, pp.211-236). Everything seems to be perfect. However, the problem of engagement has interfered, making the combination of online and traditional brick-and-mortar education the only possible solution, called to improve the situation, as the teacher remains the best "tool" for working out individual programs of language learning, more effective than any adaptive system (Tannen: 1990, pp.73-90). Thus, when it comes to personalization, the creators of modern adaptive educational systems admit that:

....when data about one individual can be compared to larger learner populations, recommendations for next steps in a learning program are likely to be more reliable. It is, however, worth bearing in mind that these recommendations can never be 100% reliable: there are too many differences between individual learners for this to be possible.

This means that too many factors are to be taken into account to motivate the production of speech in the target language (Ashrapova et al.: 2019). The main obstacle to mastering oral speech is seen in the limited amount of vocabulary and grammar patterns at the initial level of language learning. Both in textbooks and computer programs, the linguistic minimum and conversation topics are determined by the team of authors, who suggest educational tasks (exercises) aimed at developing a certain level of communicative competence (Philips:1980, pp.523-544; Xiang-cui: 2010; Xia: 2013). The criteria for selecting a lexical-grammatical minimum are usually its frequency, wide range of functions and correspondence to the topic under study. However, the vocabulary of each person is in many respects individual, it reflects his/her life experience, living conditions, familiar words and phrases, traditionally included in everyday life of the family and their close environment (Coates: 2015).

Thus, individualization (personalization) of training in the formation of productive skills, and speaking, implies a greater targeting in the organization of educational activities: from the most common guidelines for differentiating tasks according to the level of linguistic complexity (taking into account the level of students' communicative competence ) to personalizing tasks and activities according to ethnic, cultural and gender characteristics of learners, engaged in meaningful communication (Carli:1990; Grace:2000, pp.214-224; Reilly: 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Our research is based on quantitative analysis of the numerical data collected from boys and girls, studying in secondary schools, with the aim to find out their preferences in selecting topics for producing meaningful utterances. A self-completed questionnaire, including only one question "Which topic do you enjoy talking about in your English class?", was drafted to reveal gender differences in the choice of subjects for classroom discussions. The target audience included 43 boys and 43 girls from secondary schools. The results were processed by means of comparative data analysis.

## RESULTS

In the previous work “Relevant topics, motivating learners of English to produce meaningful utterances”, we determined the ratio of preferences with respect to topics for oral utterances among school teachers and students to identify the challenges the teacher faces when organizing classroom discussions. The research yielded the following results: the conversation topics that the teachers believed to arouse the greatest interest among modern schoolchildren appeared to be among the least favored by them. New generation of adolescents is much more interested in social, political and cultural issues that are relevant to the modern world. They like speaking about their future perspectives and money issues. While according to the expectations of their teachers, students are more focused on their personal problems and family relationships. This discrepancy between students’ real preferences and teachers’ assumptions hampers the successful implementation of speaking activities as motivation in the field of oral speech largely depends on an adequately chosen topic. The better we meet students’ interests the more successful our classroom communication and the higher the level of students’ communicative competence will be.

These conclusions have led us to the next stage of our study: to explore gender differences in the choice of a topic that would be an effective motive for generating meaningful utterances. Personalization of foreign language learning starts with taking into account certain major differences in the level of students’ communicative competence, in preferences for certain topics and learning activities as a strong motivational factor, which gets them speaking in the target language. Gender exercises a strong effect on the content and form of learning activities. The selection of a conversational topic is one of the aspects that most seriously takes into account gender as a powerful motivational factor. It has great influence on how successful the learning activities based on a certain conversational topic will be. Despite numerous research devoted to gender issues in education, it remains relevant for teaching practices as women’s role in social life has dramatically changed everywhere in the world.

According to R. Lakoff’s study done in 1975, “... women are marginable to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men.....The personal identity of women thus is linguistically submerged; the language works against treatment of women as serious persons with individual views” (Lakoff: 1973,pp.45-79). Today, this statement will be qualified as sexist, not reflecting the current socio-political situation. The gender issue requires constant monitoring with subsequent thorough analysis of the collected data. Every five years textbooks for learners of foreign languages are edited and new editions are published not because of the changes in the lexis and grammar of the target language but because of the social changes that influence the priorities and preferences of the younger generation, the new content of their conversations, reflecting new environments (Kaushanskaya et al.: 2013, pp.82-89).

What are young people like today? Observation one: students, on the whole, have become more pragmatic. They set definite goals and move towards them. The main characteristic feature of the goal is personal gain. And this is not bad, rather even good. Such attitudes provide good opportunities for becoming a successful person (in one’s career, in hobbies, etc.) (Криксунова: 2018).

Observation two: Today’s young people are neither worse and nor better. They are just different: mobile, creative, with a good sense of humor ... Yes, they have a different pattern of behavior - they are more closed, many live by the principle: “Everything’s fine with me”. At the same time, we, adults, are surprised at their degree of responsibility or their attitude towards friendship, marriage, and family. It is very nice that the value has not changed.

Observation three: In a political climate where most adults are inert with despair, a growing number of teenagers are responding with action. After 14 children and three adults were massacred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, it was students – not parents, teachers or political representatives – who organized themselves to campaign for changes to US gun laws (Pires: 2018).

These are just a few empirical observations posted on the Internet sites and cited here to compare this general picture of the younger generation with the results of our survey.

In 1992, Katherine Bischooping studied gender differences in conversation topics comparing them to Henry Moore's observations made in 1922. After examining reports of quantitative observation studies conducted between 1922 and 1990, the researcher comes to the conclusion that there exists "the apparent trend toward smaller gender differences" (Bischooping: 1993, pp.1-18). We conducted a similar research based on quantitative evidence fixed in the table, containing the data collected from secondary level schoolchildren: 43 girls and 43 boys. In the case of classroom discussions, we cannot expect that certain physical surroundings might influence the selection of the topic, thus, this survey is purely based on learners' preferences. We did not ask to give their names or provide any other personal information. The schoolchildren were requested to tick off their preference for this or that conversation topic and specify their gender to make our conclusions more accurate. If not willing to participate, they were free to leave blank spaces.

№	Topics	Boys	Girls	Difference
	Ethical Issues	14	11	3
	Cultural Issues	34	35	1
	Current Social and Political Issues	20	21	1
	Personal Problems	6	4	2
	Family Relationships	4	5	1
	School Activities	18	9	9
	Maintaining Friendship	17	17	0
	Health	15	12	3
	Food	15	22	7
	Sport	16	17	1
	Music	16	23	7
	Hobby	16	25	9
	Clothes	8	19	11
	Jobs	28	23	5
	Computers (Internet)	21	8	13
	Money	18	14	4
	Crime	14	11	3

**Table 1.** Most favoured topics by schoolchildren

The table shows that the topics most favored by schoolchildren (Cultural Issues and Current Social/Political Issues) appeal both to boys and girls. There is practically no difference (boys – 34, girls – 35 and 20 - 21). At least three generations of women have enjoyed equal rights with men, long enough to realize that their role in solving pressing socio-political issues is as important as men's. Text activities in the foreign language classroom are frequently based on stories about women's success in carrying out complicated national and international duties, the work, which has definitely born its fruit. The content of texts and the follow up activities in the form of classroom discussions greatly contribute to shaping learners' worldview and their attitudes to the surrounding reality. Researchers emphasize the high educative potential of fictional works, studied in high school, owing to the emotions that schoolchildren experience while reading classical literature. It is important to thoroughly analyze these texts and organize disputes to ensure the moral development of young readers (Kayumova et al.: 2018, pp.1467-1475).

## **DISCUSSION**

Discussions of personal problems and family relationships are beyond the interests of both boys and girls (Personal Problems – 6 boys and 4 girls; Family Relationships – 4 boys and 5 girls). In the previous article we analyzed the pros and cons of speech activities based on personal experiences, especially those referring to family matters and private life (Kuznetsova et al.:2018, pp.203-205). The issues of making and keeping friends are among those chosen by 17 boys and 17 girls. These figures arouse no surprise as for teenagers mixing with peers and maintaining friendship have always been among their priorities. However, it is worth noting that less than a half of the respondents (both girls and boys) have identified this topic as suitable for classroom discussion. In this case the preferences can be explained by a personality type (being an introvert or extravert rather than belonging to a certain gender). The same interest is displayed to the topic of Sport (16 -17) and Health (15 - 12).

Researchers note that younger generation today is more pragmatic and career-oriented. The 1990 study noted that the most discussed topic both by men and women was Work and Money (Ibid.) The table provides evidence of this trend showing that the topic “Jobs” is popular both with boys and girls since more than a half of the respondents have chosen it as their preference (boys – 28, girls - 23). “Money” enjoys even more popularity than “Music” and “Sport” (boys – 18, girls - 14).

Are there any differences at all? There are but not many. Boys enjoy discussing computers (21), while only eight girls consider them worth speaking about. Another gender difference in topic selections must have survived ages and possibly will continue to lead in gender-oriented surveys: “Clothes” (8 boys and 19 girls). However, this topic is crucial to depicting a person’s appearance and teachers when getting their students speaking about people and their personality should be more resourceful in developing communicative tasks to motivate boys.

Girls prefer talking about leisure activities (Hobby: 25 girls vs 16 boys and Food: 22 girls vs 15 boys), however, boys choose School Activities (18 boys vs 9 girls). These figures give food for thought.

The analysis of the figures presented in the table has yielded the following results: Gender differences in selections of topics for classroom discussions are definitely getting weaker (Hanafiyeh&Afghari: 2014, pp.1168-1177). Younger generation is more oriented towards material rather than spiritual aspects of their immediate environment. They are more pragmatic and career-oriented, they are ready to discuss socio-political issues rather than personal problems and family relationships (Thelwall et al.: 2019, pp.149-169). However, girls favor topics about clothes and leisure activities, while boys would like to discuss computers and school activities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Today schoolchildren are more mature and pragmatic, more concerned about their career prospects and world issues. Considering the importance of addressing learners’ personal experience to stimulate interest in the process of communication and, accordingly, to involve them into a meaningful communication, it is necessary to comply with certain conditions for the organization of educational activities, namely:

- Be aware of the challenges of the speech skills development and personalize the content and forms of learning activities;
- Choose topics that are relevant to a given group of learners, giving preference to cultural, social and political issues;
- Take into account gender differences in selections of topics for classroom discussions to provide additional communicative stimulus to get other sex interested;

- Monitor the changes in schoolchildren's perception of their immediate environment and the world image to be able to promptly respond to the challenges of classroom discussions.

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